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Smart Management: Grape Canopy Seminar at Wagner's Winery

by Tim Martinson

LODI, NY: Over 90 Finger Lakes grape growers turned out for a day-long seminar at Wagner Winery and Vineyards with world-renowned Australian viticulturist Richard Smart, on June 19, 2003. Dr. Smart is best known for his book *Sunlight into Wine*, which describes how to apply canopy management techniques in vineyards to maximize light interception and fruit exposure to sunlight. This book has guided vineyardists worldwide in using canopy management techniques to increase yields, improve fruit quality, and achieve better wine quality.

"Improving our growing practices through canopy management will improve the quality of our wines," said Jim Bedient, president of the New York State wine growers, who sponsored the seminar. "The higher the quality of fruit we produce, the more prosperous our industry will be." In introducing Smart, Bedient noted that his book has been an invaluable guide used by area growers to improve both yields and quality of their grapevines.

Concepts described in the book were based on pioneering research on light interception and canopy microclimate in vineyards by the late Dr. Nelson Shaulis at Cornell's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY. As a PhD student of Dr. Shaulis from 1972-1975, Dr. Smart measured light interception in a Seneca Lake Concord vineyard five miles from Wagner's vineyards. For Dr. Smart, the visit to the east side of Seneca Lake was a return to the location where he started his professional career.

In the morning program, growers heard Dr. Smart discuss areas of the world that have a climate similar to the Finger Lakes (Austria, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and parts of Russia), some potential novel grape varieties for the region (Rkatsiteli and Separavi, among others), and the physiology and practical application of canopy management.

After lunch, the seminar moved into the field, where host John Wagner, of Wagner's Winery and Vineyards, has put these canopy management principles into practice. He demonstrated how the grape canopy on his Cabernet Franc and Riesling vineyards is separated into upward and downward-positioned shoots through the use of moveable catch wires—a training system known as Scott Henry, named for the Oregon vineyardist who first used it.

By positioning shoots in this manner, Wagner is able to produce a 7-foot-tall grapevine canopy extending from ground level to the top of his trellis. This increases sunlight interception, and positions fruit clusters in a narrow band midway up the canopy, where they are less shaded. Wagner, who used to mechanically remove leaves in the cluster zone to increase fruit exposure, no longer needs to do so with the Scott Henry system.



Suggested caption: Dr. Richard Smart (left) and John Wagner of Wagner's Winery near Lodi (right) discussed how to use moveable catch wires to establish the vertically-divided grapevine canopy, a system known as Scott Henry training.

Wagner is known throughout the Finger Lakes industry as one of the area's top vineyard managers. He has done a meticulous job in adapting the Scott Henry system and other principles described by Smart to the 200 acres of vineyards he manages.

Bedient hoped the seminar would inspire growers to take a closer look at how they manage their vines. "If growers come away with one new idea that improves their fruit quality, lowers their costs, or makes their job easier, the time they spent here will have been worthwhile," he said. "Our future depends on the quality and reputation of Finger Lakes wines."

The meeting was sponsored by Cornell Cooperative Extension's Finger Lakes Grape Program, based in Penn Yan, and the New York State Wine Grape Growers, an organization representing grape growers throughout New York.

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